

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENTS OF HEALTH AND GAME AND INLAND
FISHERIES PROMOTE BAT AWARENESS AND SAFETY**

(RICHMOND, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) are reminding residents that bats become more active and more visible in our communities during the spring. Bats make important contributions to our environment, but like other wild animals, they can carry potentially fatal diseases such as rabies.

Although most of the confirmed rabid animals in the United States are raccoons (2,635 in 2003), humans are more likely to be infected with bat rabies viruses. Since 1990, 29 of 45 human rabies infections have resulted from bat viruses, and only one human has been infected with a raccoon virus.

"It is very important for people to avoid contact with any wild animals, or even domestic animals that they don't know. Bats present a special concern because their tiny bites may not be recognized," said Suzanne Jenkins, V.M.D., M.P.H, state public health veterinarian. "Less than one percent of bats are infected with rabies. However, bats that are acting abnormal, such as those being active during the day, found in a room of your home or unable to fly, have a higher probability of being positive for rabies."

"Bats are an important natural resource and valuable assets to our lives," said Rick Reynolds, VDGIF wildlife diversity biologist. "Several species of bats are now endangered, so we must be mindful of the environmental importance of bats, recognize the value of living safely with them, and seek ways to protect their habitats."

Through the study of bats, scientists have gained valuable knowledge about sonar, navigational aids for the blind, treatment of strokes, vaccine development, and artificial insemination.

Bats normally fly at night eating various insects including mosquitoes and agricultural pests such as corn borer moths. During the day they roost quietly by hanging upside down.

Bats can enter homes through small openings and may end up roosting in attics. In hot months they may seek cooler temperatures and end up in living spaces. If you find a bat in your home and are sure there has been no human or pet contact, allow the bat to find its way back outdoors by closing off the room, turning on the lights and opening all windows and doors.

If bats are roosting in the house, you will need to find out how they get in by observing their exit holes at dusk. Once you have found the holes where the bats gain access, these areas should be loosely covered with plastic sheeting or bird netting which will allow bats to crawl out and leave but not re-enter. The best time to do this is either between April and May or between August and September, as young bats are typically born in late May through June.

You want to avoid trapping young bats in the house during the summer months. During the summer, many of these young bats are unable to fly. They may become trapped inside and die or may make their way into living quarters. For professional help, call a company that has experience dealing with excluding bats from buildings so that you and the bats are kept safe.

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Once you are sure that all bats have left your house, you'll want to bat-proof your property. Carefully examine your home for holes that might allow bats to enter. Any openings larger than a quarter-inch by half-inch should be sealed with caulk. Use window screens, chimney caps and draft guards beneath attic doors, fill electrical and plumbing holes with steel wool or caulking, and ensure that all doors to the outside close tightly.

If you are bitten by a bat or awaken to find a bat in your room, try to capture the bat so it can be tested for rabies. This approach is also recommended if you notice a bat in the room of an unattended child or someone else who is unable to report whether a bat had contact with them. Contact your local health department or an animal-control agency for advice.

To find out more about the benefits of bats and safe co-existence with bats, log onto http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/bats_&_rabies/bats&.htm.

Instructions for capturing a bat

Carefully avoid direct contact with the bat and avoid damaging its head.

- Close the windows, and the room and closet doors; turn on the lights if the room is dark
- Wait for the bat to land
- Wearing gloves (heavy, preferably thick leather), cover the bat with a coffee can or similar container with a lid
- Slide a piece of cardboard under the can, trapping the bat
- With one hand firmly holding the cardboard in place against the top of the can, turn the can right side up
- Replace the cardboard with the lid (if there is no lid, tape the cardboard tightly to the can)
- Contact your local health department to arrange for rabies examination of the bat.

If you find a dead bat, it should be double-bagged in plastic and placed in a cooler or refrigerated area. *Under no circumstances* should a bat be stored in the same cooler or refrigerator as food or pharmaceuticals. The specimen should be kept away from potential contact with people or other animals.

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